

Distractions – Communion Meditation

Romans 8: 6-11

Several years ago, one of my friends was training with an airline to be certified as one of their pilots, and part of his instruction was a course on cockpit management. Cockpit management has become the foundation for operating a modern airliner in this age of advanced technology. As a part of this training, my friend was required to listen to a cockpit voice recording of the infamous Flight 401 - the Eastern Airlines Lockheed Tristar which crashed in the Florida Everglades on September 29, 1972, killing 101 passengers and crew.

If you've read about Flight 401 or remember the accident, you will recall that the airliner was on its final approach to Miami International Airport when, after dropping its landing gear, one of the indicator lights failed to work. Captain Bob Loft, a pilot with 32 years of experience, was probably more capable than anyone else at Eastern to fly that particular plane, and he was absolutely convinced that the problem was one of instrumentation rather than the landing gear itself.

Requesting to put the plane into a holding pattern at a low altitude, Loft turned on the autopilot, giving he and the copilot the ability to disassemble the landing light to see if the bulb was burned out. The Captain also instructed his Flight Engineer to go below into the avionics bay to visually confirm that the landing gear was down. Somewhere in the middle of all this confusion, the Captain accidentally turned off the autopilot, putting the plane into a slow decent.

At 1000 feet, the ground proximity warning chime sounded on the Flight Engineer's panel, but the engineer was below, and the two pilots were so distracted by the light bulb assembly that neither of them heard the soft "c" note chime of the warning. In the CVR transcript, the copilot turns back to his instruments and immediately announces, "We did something to the altitude," to which the pilot responds, "What?" The copilot replies, "We're still at 2000 feet, right," which leads to the pilots last words before the crash: "Hey, what's happening here?"

"Hey, what's happening here?" In those words, we hear the shock and bewilderment of a fatal distraction. But we do not need to hear such a tragic recording to be aware of the dangerous distractions that plague our own lives. A week ago Tuesday, the city of Tucson passed a hands-free ordinance that made it a violation to drive and hold a cell phone. (Texas)

Ordinary distractions can have a humorous side. One of my favorite videos on YouTube shows a gamer on his computer, completely engrossed in playing, while behind him on the couch is his girlfriend, who is passionately making out with the gamer's best friend. I don't know how authentic the video is, but it's very funny. We know that most distractions, though, are destructive rather than humorous, and can lead to unintended consequences which hurt our lives or the lives of those around us.

Distractions can be physical, emotional, and spiritual. We've already noted some destructive physical distractions that we encounter every day, but imagine that you go into your doctor's office for a routine exam, only to be told, "I see something that needs more testing." It's kind of hard to concentrate after you leave the doctor's office, isn't it? Shakespeare's Hamlet talked about "the heartache, and the thousand natural shocks that

flesh is heir to...” each one of which, we know, can lead us into a state of emotional distraction, where we are no longer capable of making decisions or functioning in an ordinary way.

Recent studies by cognitive scientists have shown that our brains have limited bandwidth for communicating and resolving information, even as our emotional capacities can be overwhelmed by certain conditions; but what about our spiritual selves? The Apostle Paul, writing quite a few years before the advent of modern science, simply takes for granted that distractions that pull us away from our spiritual lives is not only real, but common to the human experience: “To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” Our answer to the distractions of the flesh might be to isolate ourselves from the outer noise of life to seek inner peace, but that rarely works.

In talking about the discipline of spiritual focus for followers of Christ, Henri J.M. Nouwen writes, “As soon as we are alone,...inner chaos opens up in us. This chaos can be so disturbing and so confusing that we can hardly wait to get busy again. Entering a private room and shutting the door, therefore, does not mean that we immediately shut out all our inner doubts, anxieties, fears, bad memories, unresolved conflicts, angry feelings and impulsive desires. On the contrary, when we have removed our outer distraction, we often find that our inner distractions manifest themselves to us in full force. We often use the outer distractions to shield ourselves from the interior noises. This makes the discipline of solitude all the more important.”

Nouwen's words express the experience of Christ himself who, upon entering the wilderness to escape the outer distractions of the world, encounters the inner distractions of Satan's three temptations. Jesus replies to those distractions not by running away from them, but by focusing his outer and inner life on the will of his Father, an act of discipline which renders the voice of temptation powerless.

Paul encourages the Christians in Rome to do the same thing – to focus not on the distractions of life in the flesh, but to place those distractions under the discipline of life in and through the Holy Spirit: “But you are not in the flesh; you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you... If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you.”

Christ gifted us with the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in order to physically lead us into a place of spiritual renewal. We receive the elements of bread and wine together, but we take them individually. In this way, the Supper paints a picture of the cross, in that the horizontal gathering of Christ's church intersects our individual communion with the Holy Spirit. At times we may find ourselves distracted as we partake of the table, because sin and the world is always breaking in on us; but that does not take away what the Holy Spirit gives to us in the sharing of this meal – the help, hope, and the authentic peace of Christ which passes all understanding.

The season of Lent is intended to be a time of disciplined reflection – a time in which we resist the distractions that disturb our hearts and pull us away from our faith. But the true meaning of the Lenten season is found not in our ability to shut out the world, but in our ability to let in the Holy Spirit, which provides us the means, the energy, and focus to stay

in tune with the will and the love of our Savior. At the table we find the Spirit waiting for us with joy, and offering its divine gifts – grace for our sins, comfort for our anxieties, and guidance for the journey of discipleship.

What are we focusing on this morning, as we come to this table of grace? Are we looking at a tiny broken bulb, or are we focused on listening to the warnings, the encouragement, and the guidance of the Spirit, so that we can fulfill the call of Christ and land safely in his love? In the next few moments, let us focus our hearts on the love of Christ as best as we can, and trust that the Holy Spirit will focus on us and provide us all that we need right now.